

Freedom of the Press

The media environment in Oman remained restricted in 2013. Articles 29, 30, and 31 of the 1996 Basic Law guarantee freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but these rights are abridged in practice. Oman's 1984 Press and Publications Law, one of the most restrictive media laws in the Arab world, ensures that the media remain censored and subdued. Libel is a criminal offense, and journalists can be fined or imprisoned for criticism of the sultan or material that leads to "public discord, violates the security of the state, or abuses a person's dignity or rights." In September 2013, the English-language newspaper *The Week* was shut down for one week after printing an article about the country's LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community, which carries a three-year prison sentence. The article's author and the paper's editor were charged with violating the Press and Publications Law. Under pressure from the government, the newspaper removed the article from its website, though the print issue continued to circulate.

The Telecommunications Act allows the authorities to prosecute individuals for any message sent through any means of communication that violates public order and morals. The already repressed media environment was further constrained in June 2012 when, in response to growing criticism of the government for its lack of progress on promised economic and political reforms, the Omani Department of Public Prosecution (DPP) announced that it would take legal action against any media outlet whose content was deemed "offensive" or "inciting others to actions." The DPP delivered on its promise: in 2012, 32 activists and bloggers were fined and sentenced to at least six months in prison for insulting the sultan or other public officials in online forums and other outlets. In January 2013, several of those bloggers appealed their cases, only to be overruled. However, in March Sultan Qaboos granted amnesty to all those incarcerated for insulting the sultan, violating Oman's cybercrime laws, or unlawful assembly.

Journalists are required to obtain licenses to practice, and since 2005 they have been obliged to reapply each year as employees of a specific publication, which excludes the practice of freelance journalism. Journalists and media outlets alike can have their licenses revoked at any time for violating press laws. The government also retains the right to close down any media outlet at any time.

The government exerts considerable control over the internet. The Internet Service Manual establishes an extensive list of prohibitions on defamation of the ruling family, the spread of false data or rumors, and many other types of statements. The government routinely blocks websites deemed sexually offensive or politically controversial. Some bloggers use virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass the censorship of local internet service providers, but in 2010 the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) proposed a new law that would ban the use of VPNs and subject violators to fines of 500 rials (\$1,300). The proposed law has yet to be enacted, but VPN access is widely blocked. Private communications including mobile-telephone calls, e-mail, and exchanges in internet chat rooms are monitored, and web forums where dissent is voiced, such as Farrq, Al-Harah, and Al-Sabla, have also experienced temporary shutdowns.

The Ministry of Information is legally empowered to censor politically, culturally, or sexually offensive material in domestic or foreign media and has blacklisted several authors and specific books that have been deemed controversial. While information and news are widely available, there is a basic lack of coverage of local topics, such as the economy, unemployment, or the situation of migrants and other

minorities in Oman. Reporters have been jailed in the past for coverage of colleagues' arrests, so self-censorship is widespread. As a result, journalists are rarely subject to physical threats or assault. However, since the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, the government has cracked down forcefully against public demonstrations and other expressions of dissent. During 2012, 12 activists, writers, and bloggers were sentenced to one year in prison and fined roughly \$2,600 for participating in peaceful protests against libel and insult convictions. The only permanent foreign media presence in Oman is a Reuters correspondent in Muscat.

In addition to the two major state-owned newspapers, the government owns four radio stations and two television stations. There are eight privately run newspapers currently operating in Oman. Private newspapers are able to sustain themselves largely on local and international advertising revenues rather than sales, and many no longer need state subsidies. The country's lone privately owned satellite network provides access to foreign broadcasts but refrains from airing politically controversial content. About 66 percent of the population had access to the internet in 2013, up 6 percent from 2012. Oman's internet and telecommunications sector was under a monopoly of the state-run Oman Telecommunications Company until 2008, when the government allowed a privately owned competitor, Nawras, to begin providing service.

2014 Scores

Press Status

Not Free

Press Freedom Score

(0 = best, 100 = worst)

71

Legal Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

25

Political Environment

(0 = best, 40 = worst)

27

Economic Environment

(0 = best, 30 = worst)

19